

Why the U.S. Chose a 'Thin' A.B.M.

By WILLIAM BEECHER

WASHINGTON—In the formal statement announcing the Administration's decision to deploy a limited missile defense around the country last week, Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara declared:

"The danger in deploying this relatively light and reliable Chinese-oriented A.B.M. (anti-ballistic missile) system is going to be that pressures will develop to expand it into a heavy Soviet-oriented A.B.M. system."

Mr. McNamara, in his statement, announced that this light Nike-X missile network would cost \$5-billion and be deployed to assure against the possibility of a Chinese Communist attack in the next decade. A heavier system to defend against Soviet missiles would cost much more.

He showed how strongly he opposes any expansion of this limited program by departing from his text, whose every word and nuance had been carefully gone over at the Pentagon, State Department and White House, to add this personal opinion: "I know of nothing we could do today that would waste more of our resources or add more to our risks."

Strenuous Argument

That was pretty strong language, particularly since some of Mr. McNamara's top military advisers on the Joint Chiefs of Staff had strenuously argued in favor of a much bigger system designed to defend against a Russian ICBM attack.

Mr. McNamara spent a substantial portion of his speech trying to answer these arguments, presumably in hopes of forestalling some of the pressures he predicted. The pressures were not long in surfacing.

On Capitol Hill, two key members of the influential Joint Committee on Atomic Energy, Senators John O. Pastore of Rhode Island and Henry M. Jackson of Washington, hailed the decision as a good first step and called on the Administration to take the second, to defend against the Soviets. The Military Applications Subcommittee headed by Sen-

ator Jackson is to begin hearings on the question early next month.

In brief, Mr. McNamara believes that a heavy missile defense, whether it cost \$10-billion, \$20-billion or \$40-billion, would be ineffective, because the Russians would be forced to build enough additional ICBM's to make sure they could penetrate it. And he feels it would be counter-productive because the inevitable upward spiral in the arms race would drain money in both countries that might be put to better use, would increase world tensions, and might eliminate any chance for meaningful arms limitation agreements.

The cornerstone of America's nuclear strategy, in Mr. McNamara's view, is deterrence. If the United States possesses enough ICBM's so that even

after suffering a first strike it could retaliate and kill tens of millions of the enemy, then the enemy should be deterred from initiating nuclear war.

But the Joint Chiefs and certain other planners, while agreeing that deterrence probably will work, want to protect against the possibility that it won't. They believe a heavy Nike-X system would save tens of millions of American lives if deterrence failed.

On the limited Nike X, virtually all officials, civilian and military, who had studied the system, agreed it would very likely prevent the Chinese from hitting American cities with ICBM's in the next decade.

One intelligence estimate sees the Chinese getting their first operational BM in about 1970 and a force of 25 to 75 ICBM's by 1975.

There is reason to believe Mr. McNamara would have preferred waiting perhaps another year or so before going ahead with a Chinese-oriented system on the rationale that since the threat would not be significant until 1975, and since a light Nike-X system to handle it could be emplaced in five years, there was still time.

But some Administration and Congressional figures were worried about the faster-than-expected pace of the Chinese nuclear warhead and missile programs. And it was becoming increasingly likely, as the 1968 election neared, that the Republicans would roast Mr. Johnson, if he had not acted, for being willing to spend more than \$2-billion a month to defend Vietnam but unwilling to spend \$5-billion over five years to defend the United States.